

## PlanFirst Program Application - May 15, 2016

**Introduction:** The Department of Community Affairs' PlanFirst Program rewards local governments that clearly demonstrate success with implementing their local comprehensive plan. To apply for PlanFirst designation, a local government must have Qualified Local Government certification and be current on required reporting to DCA. (To check status of both, please visit <http://www.georgiaplanning.com/planners/planreview/default.asp>).

A multi-agency review panel will evaluate a number of indicators of community success with plan implementation to select communities for this designation. All of these indicators are equally important, but size of the community is taken into consideration in the evaluation so that communities of various sizes are equally competitive for PlanFirst designation.

**Instructions:** Please answer all the following questions thoroughly, attaching additional pages where necessary, so that the reviewers have sufficient information to measure the success of your comprehensive plan implementation. Supporting documents might include: news articles, legal ads, lists of attendees, letters of support or other evidence of local involvement and commitment to successful plan implementation activities in your community. *Total application length, including supporting information and support letters, must not exceed 20 pages. Text areas will expand as needed.*

Applicant government	City of Vidalia
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Application prepared by	Nick Overstreet/Assistant City Manager
I, the undersigned authorized representative of the applicant, certify that to the best of my knowledge the information in this application is true and correct.	
Name of authorized official signing; title	Ronnie A. Dixon, Mayor
Date	
Signature	

## PRE-REQUISITES

**A. (1)** We have a good track record of maintaining our Qualified Local Government status **and** submitting required reports to DCA, including the current Report of Local Government Finances. (To check status, please visit <http://www.georgiaplanning.com/planners/planreview/default.asp>).

QLG status:	<u>yes</u>	no
Local government reports:	<u>yes</u>	no

**A. (2)** We have attained the Minimum Standard for performance as called for in our regional commission's regional comprehensive plan.

<u>yes</u>	no
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The Heart of Georgia Altamaha Regional Commission has informed us that we currently are in compliance with the Minimum Performance Standards of its adopted plan, but we do need to adopt an ordinance(s) in compliance with the Part V Environmental Planning Criteria by September, 2017 to remain in compliance. The Regional Commission will assist us with this task in State Fiscal Year 2017. This activity is listed in our new Community Work Program (Page 143).

For each of the following indicators, fully explain how your community addresses this indicator; identifying specific examples and resulting local successes. (Each indicator will be scored 1, 3 or 5 points, except indicators j. and t. which may score up to 10 points.) Add exhibits and examples as needed to tell your story.

## INDICATOR: GOALS

**B.** The Goals (or Vision) section of our comprehensive plan is supported by the community and its leadership.

Community support and involvement have been a hallmark of our comprehensive plan and its implementation. Our first comprehensive plan in 1992 was entitled "Together and Forward" to honor this spirit of cooperation and collaboration. That plan won a Georgia Planning Association award for community involvement. Similar committed efforts were utilized to form a broad based steering committee and involve the entire community to develop our current comprehensive plan. Our vision to be a thriving regional center which preserves its warm, small-town atmosphere where family, heritage, and quality-of-life is celebrated and utilized for community improvement and a platform for economic diversification is not only expressed in our plan, but utilized and supported as a platform of action.

The vision of our leaders can be easily recognized through the accomplishments of our joint comprehensive plan: *Sweet! So Much More Than The Vidalia Onion*. As the title suggests, there is a commitment amongst leaders to accomplish a variety of goals as set forth by the joint comprehensive plan. Any visitor to the Vidalia community can experience for themselves a strong sense of community pride and leadership through the vision and accomplishments that

continue to be made. Our leadership has a thriving passion to see the community grow and prosper, while preserving our heritage, culture, and quality-of-life. The community supports our leadership by participating in projects and displaying cohesiveness to see the greater good accomplished no matter what opportunity or issue is at hand.

Several recent examples clearly showcase the willingness of the leadership to embrace a community minded environment. The Stage at City Park (Amphitheater) was completed in 2015 to be utilized as a venue for our community and the City to host events throughout the year. Several concerts, and more recently events of the 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Vidalia Onion Festival, have been hosted at the venue. In late 2015, a splash pad was completed at the Ben Smith Park downtown for children in the community to come and play at no cost. More recently, the City has begun a project to renovate its historic Pal Theatre in downtown to drive economic development in downtown and provide an entertainment venue for our citizens and visitors.

**C. The Goals are both ambitious and achievable for the community.**

While we believe Vidalia is an exceptional community, we also believe we can make it even better. We are truly “so much more than the Vidalia Onion,” and we have utilized our plan to set the future path of improvement. We have an excellent past record of plan achievement, and already are making much progress in advancing the goals and vision expressed in our 2014 plan, as partially noted in our answer of community support. We have set our future desires high, but wholeheartedly believe we can reach them, and even go beyond.

The City of Vidalia has created an environment for the future that fosters a proactive outlook for its community. While having a progressive mindset, City leaders make sure to recognize what is feasible for the future. Economic development is an ongoing process that requires being aggressive, but also keeps realistic and multi-faceted goals in mind. Recently, with the collaboration of the Toombs-Montgomery Development Authority, the Vidalia Board of Education, and Toombs County, the City of Vidalia assisted DOT Foods with an expansion to continue supporting its growth. The City also recognized a need to continue housing growth and development by adopting an ordinance which supports smart growth living in its historic downtown. City leaders saw a need for more mixed use, but also kept in mind the importance of retail development.

**D. The Goals steer local decision-making on a continuous basis.**

Vidalia officials, both elected and appointed alike, as well as its citizenry, view our comprehensive plan as a blueprint and guide for sound growth and development. Not only were we heavily involved in the comprehensive plan’s development, but we utilize it to program and measure our steps of advancement and implementation.

Without keeping the goals at the forefront of their discussions, City leaders would be failing to keep their long-term vision in mind. Comprehensive plan goal-oriented local decision-making by our leaders is paramount for our city's future. Smart growth and planning through the

development of the goals established is the driving force that guides our thought process. The goals that our leadership has established are significant because of the effect they have on the community as a whole.

The Report of Accomplishments on our previous Short Term Work Program showed completion of the vast majority of listed activities. The community has already completed some items in the new 2015-2019 Community Work Program. It is evident that the City of Vidalia's leaders plan and implement projects in a continuing effective and successful manner.

**E. Consistent progress is being made at achieving the Goals.**

Every day, our City leaders are examining new ideas and taking a progressive approach to achieving goals that we have set forth. Steady progress, implementation, and achievement are happening. We are already accomplishing many goals set forth in our joint comprehensive plan and a significant number of the activities specified in the Community Work Program. A fire department ladder truck has been purchased. Our Adams Street TIA project has been completed. Numerous projects are nearing their final stages routinely. As mentioned earlier in Sections B and C, project implementation and achievements continue to move at a rapid pace for the City of Vidalia. In addition, we are about to begin a construction expansion on our Boys and Girls Club of Toombs County. Funded through a GA Department of Community Affairs CDBG, the expanded facility will allow for a larger population to be served. Our leaders are about to embark on building a new swimming pool facility at Sweet Onion Drive and Airport Road to host swim meets on the local level and state level beginning next spring. Our city leaders are taking a broad view and holistic approach to implementing our plan, improving our community and its quality of life through economic development, land use, housing, community facilities, and cultural resources.

## **INDICATOR: LEADERSHIP**

**F. We have effective planning staff or another suitable arrangement for handling community planning matters.**

We have a very effective mechanism and structure for planning within Vidalia. The City Manager is responsible for the day-to-day planning activities under the guidance of the Mayor and City Council. The City Manager works in conjunction with city engineers, the City Marshall, ESG Operations, Inc. (Utilities Private Contractor), and other staff to ensure that proper planning is in place for all projects. The City of Vidalia has established a host of volunteer committees that consist of a variety of individuals who provide input and advice into what the future of our community and these projects should look like. The Mayor appoints the following committees to assist in these matters:

1. Recreation Board - 8 member board with two City Council liaisons
2. Downtown Development Authority - 7 member board
3. Vidalia Development Authority - 5 member board
4. Development Authority of Vidalia - 7 member board consisting of bankers
5. Vidalia Housing Authority - 5 member board
6. Vidalia Planning Commission - 7 member board

7. Revolving Loan Committee - 6 member board
8. Convention and Visitors Bureau Board - 12 member board (including City Manager and City Clerk)

In addition to the aforementioned boards, the City of Vidalia also enlists the assistance of the Heart of Georgia Altamaha Regional Commission with planning matters as well.

**G.** We have an active planning commission or similar body to steer local planning decisions.

As previously mentioned, the City of Vidalia has a seven member Planning Commission. The Planning Commission provides guidance to the Mayor and City Council on planning and zoning decisions, and other issues on which they are asked to review or that may arise. Along with the Planning Commission, the Mayor appoints seven committees that City Council members serve on to investigate issues, problems, and solutions. The committees consist of:

1. Streets and Sanitation
2. Finance and Personnel
3. Licenses, Taxes, and Permits
4. Water and Sewer
5. Airport
6. Police and Fire
7. Community Building

City Council members serve as liaisons on the Downtown Vidalia Association (Main Street). The City Manager and a City Council member also serve on the Vidalia Onion Festival Committee. All of these committees provide mechanisms and means to achieve community input and information to shape and influence local planning decisions.

**H.** We have a regular local plan effectiveness evaluation process (such as annual planning retreats of elected leadership).

Our plan effectiveness and implementation evaluation process is managed and administered through the City Manager. The City Manager sets the agenda and activities needed to carry out the projects envisioned in the plan and policies set by the Mayor and Council. The City Manager meets with the department heads of the City every Monday to plan and review day-to-day activities. The City Manager reports status and progress often to the elected officials on an informal basis. Formal reporting and evaluation takes place officially at monthly Council meetings and in regular work sessions. Formal retreats and planning sessions are held with the Mayor and City Council every six months. At these semi-annual meetings, City staff and officials evaluate the status and implementation of current projects, and plan for future projects and activities.

**I.** All local officials (both elected and appointed) involved in local planning processes have recently attended training in how to use the plan effectively. Please indicate what trainings and the date(s) attended.

Semi-annually, the Mayor and City Council attend GMA. City staff consistently goes to training offered by GMA and other organizations to ensure everyone is up-to-date on laws, current practices, etc. Our Mayor Pro-tem is the Chairman of the Heart of GA Altamaha Regional Commission and attends its monthly meetings. City Council members have participated in the GA Academy for Economic Development and Leadership Toombs Montgomery.

**J.** Provide up to ten of your best recent examples where the plan steered a key local decision, with pertinent plan references (attach additional sheets as needed).

1. Complete Adams Street Project (2016), Current CWP, p. 141
2. Complete historic renovation of Pal Theatre for public use (Currently in process 2016), Current CWP, p.142
3. Pave Ezra Taylor Road (Currently in process 2016), Current CWP, p. 142
4. Promote quarterly events to be held at Stage at City Park (amphitheater) (Currently in process 2016), Current CWP, p. 141
5. Purchase a ladder fire truck (2015), Current CWP, p. 142
6. Program to eliminate dilapidated housing (2014), ROA, p.140
7. Construct a new Police Department Facility (2013), ROA, p. 140
8. Expand the Community Center (2010), ROA, p. 139
9. Complete airport drainage improvements (2010), ROA, p. 139
10. Complete water/sewer improvements in Poe Street neighborhood with CDBG (2010), ROA, p.139

## **INDICATOR: PARTICIPATION**

**K.** Our comprehensive plan was prepared with multiple community input opportunities.

As noted earlier, community support and involvement in preparation and implementation of its comprehensive plan have always been important to the City of Vidalia. With the latest plan, Toombs County local governments clearly wanted to take advantage of the new DCA planning standards to develop a broad-based community plan which would involve and excite all concerned, both public and private, with the future growth and development of Toombs County and its municipalities. To accomplish this, they created a steering committee, the Toombs County Joint Comprehensive Plan Coordination Committee, of all local stakeholders who could be envisioned to help guide this plan's development, and make the community a better place to live, work, recreate, and learn. This committee included members from the governing authorities, local economic development practitioners, and local government staff, as well as others concerned with community and economic development within the entire community. This Coordination Committee had outstanding participation, was actively involved in the development of all facets of this comprehensive plan, and had numerous opportunities to both help develop, review, and revise all components. The first orders of business at any Coordination Committee meeting were review of any revisions to previous elements based on committee input, and chances to return to and modify earlier elements, if desired. The initial meeting of the local Plan Coordination Committee included a formal identification of strengths and weaknesses of the community, including opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis). This identification was utilized in developing all plan elements. The general public was offered the chance to participate at the two required public hearings (and with the Coordination Committee, if desired, after the initial public hearing), and through internet comment after plan elements (community vision and issues and opportunities) were posted. These hearings were advertised through unique wording to specifically generate interest and participation. The initial public hearing was held near the beginning of the plan development process to explain the process, offer opportunity for further participation, and solicit input on an improved community vision and local issues/opportunities. The final public hearing was held after a plan draft was developed and reviewed by the

Coordination Committee to allow citizen review, solicit any final input, and inform of pending submittal.

**L.** The community input received during plan preparation influenced the content of the plan.

The preparation of our current 2014 comprehensive plan was met with overwhelming support and participation of the community. The development process of the plan was facilitated by the Regional Commission with extensive and thorough input by the community's Local Plan Coordination Committee and general public. The plan's content is most definitely an expression and wording of local needs and desires.

**M.** Our steering committee that guided development of the plan included local leaders and elected officials.

As previously discussed, the committee did include members from the governing authorities, local economic development practitioners, and local government staff, as well as others concerned with community and economic development within the entire community. Officials from the City of Vidalia included the City Manager, Financial Director, City Clerk, City Council Members, and others. Other community leaders involved include the Chamber, Development Authority, the President of Southeastern Technical College, School Superintendent, Convention and Visitors Bureau, elected and appointed officials from the other local governments, the Ohoopie Regional Library Director, and many others.

**N.** We have an active, ongoing, outreach process for soliciting input on planning matters from a broad spectrum of the community, including non-traditional populations, and the resulting input is listened to by community leaders.

The City of Vidalia continues to provide the community with opportunities for input in ongoing planning beyond the formal committees previously mentioned. In 2015, the Mayor and City Council established quarterly Town Hall meetings in various locations throughout the city. Citizen involvement has been tremendous since the program was established. The Downtown Development Authority hosts monthly public meetings for citizen input as well. At our monthly City Council meeting, we have a designated time set aside for public comment. The City also utilizes social media and the internet to inform citizens and seek comments. Our Mayor and City Council continue to reach out to our citizens to listen to their ideas and suggestions regularly. This community input is valued and addressed as appropriate.

**O.** We have active advocates for plan implementation (such as activist citizens, organizations or neighborhood groups) that are listened to by community leaders.

Vidalia's City Manager and its Mayor and Council are active advocates for comprehensive plan implementation. Within the community, there are three activist groups that the City leaders hear from concerning various topics consistently. City leaders meet semi-annually with the Jackson Heights Homeowners Association to discuss safety, beautification, and any other topics that concern the association. Also located in Vidalia is the Concerned Citizens Coalition that meets with City leaders annually. The Community Men of Action also attend several events throughout the year with City leaders.

## INDICATOR: IMPLEMENTATION

**P.** The Work Program section of our comprehensive plan consists primarily of specific action items that make it clear exactly what we intend to do to implement the plan.

The City's Community Work Program consists of very specific activities designed to address needs and the community's vision identified in the comprehensive plan. As noted earlier, the majority of the activities in the previous Short Term Work Program were implemented as documented in the Report of Accomplishments. Half of the examples of activities where the plan steered local decisions listed under "J." are specific activities listed in the current Community Work Program. City leaders take pride in seeing their vision come to fruition, and the comprehensive plan being implemented.

**Q.** Our Work Program action items clearly address local needs or goals identified in the plan

All of the items in our Community Work Program are important in addressing identified needs and implementing our desired community vision as expressed in our comprehensive plan. The items all help improve our infrastructure and quality of life which promote and prepare for enhanced growth and development respective of our heritage and environment.

**R.** We have a good track record of accomplishing most of the action items included in past plan Work Programs.

Our City continues to build on the past action items that have laid the foundation for our current City activities. As evidenced by the accomplishments of our City leaders and the ongoing projects, significant progress continues to be made. The majority of activities listed on the previous Short Term Work Program were completed as documented in the Report of Accomplishments. There has already been major progress on accomplishing activities listed in the new 2015-2019 Community Work Program.

**S.** Our local capital budget is consistent with, and is designed to implement, the comprehensive plan.

City leaders utilize the capital projects budget and SPLOST funds for a majority of the implementation of our comprehensive plan. The City also utilizes grants and loans to assist in the implementation of the projects. For example, a project activity was "Complete water/sewer improvements in Poe Street Neighborhood CDBG target area." This activity was completed with the assistance of a CDBG and local funding. This project, along with many others, exemplifies the City's commitment to smart growth planning.

**T.** Provide up to ten of your best recent examples of important projects carried out as a result of the plan, with the specific plan references (attach additional sheets as needed).



TIA Adams Street Project (2016/Current CWP, p. 141). The Adams Street project made street and drainage improvements along with replacing sewer laterals through Transportation Investment Act funding. This project is located on the western edge of downtown.





Historic renovation of Pal Theatre (2016/Current CWP, p. 142). The City of Vidalia purchased the historic theatre downtown to assist with the ongoing downtown revitalization efforts. The project has been selected for the 2016 Fox Theatre Institute Revival Tour.



Pave Ezra Taylor Road (2016/Current CWP, p. 142). Ezra Taylor Road is the main connector for Hwy. 280 to the new Vidalia Regional Sports Complex. It is a collaborative project between the City of Vidalia and Toombs County.



downtown revitalization efforts.



Purchase a ladder truck (2015/Current CWP, p. 142). Due to growth and expansion in the city, the City planned and purchased a ladder truck for enhanced fire protection. The purchase meets a major capital need which improves fire service and better serves existing and future development.



Implement a program to eliminate substandard/dilapidated housing (2014/ROA p. 140). City leaders implemented a housing improvement which has removed approximately 150 dilapidated houses throughout the city.



Construct a new Police Department facility (2013/ROA p. 140). City leaders purchased and developed an old grocery store site in 2013. They developed it into a modern Municipal Annex including the police department with a court room, city council chambers, and other offices for multiple uses. There is ample room for future administrative expansion.



Expand the Community Center (2010/ROA p. 139). The Vidalia Community Center is a facility that is a well utilized important and popular for civic events. Local organizations and citizens alike have utilized the facility to host charity events, banquets, and a variety of other events. The facility was upgraded and expanded in 2010.



Complete airport drainage improvements (2010/ROA p. 139). The Vidalia Municipal Airport is a repurposed WWII facility and the second largest airport in the region. Local officials continue to prioritize and plan improvements.



Complete water/sewer improvements on Poe Street (2010/ROA p. 139). In 2010 through a CDBG, the City was able to make water and sewer improvements while adding curbing to Poe Street. Such improvements continue to support neighborhoods and quality housing throughout the city. The improvements were accomplished with the assistance of a GA DCA CDBG.

Please attach additional sheets as needed to tell your story. Application should not exceed 20 pages. Application may be electronically transmitted or printed, scanned and emailed to [adriane.wood@dca.ga.gov](mailto:adriane.wood@dca.ga.gov) . For more information, contact Adriane Wood.